

Q: Good morning. My name is Helene Tischler. Today is February 12th, 2018. I'm here at the Newton City Hall Law Library with Shirlee Isenberg, who has graciously consented and volunteered to be interviewed by us. Together we're participating in the Newton Talks Oral History project that's being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Thank you so much, Shirlee, for being with us today.

A: I'm happy to join you.

Q: So can you tell me where you're from originally, and how you came to live in Newton?

A: I grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts. And when I met my husband--he was a veteran...he was a veteran, so we had the privilege--and also he lived in Newton. So he had the--we had the privilege of looking at a map of a new area being developed--Oak Hill Park. And there was a map, and I think we chose Lot 52, which--whatever that I may remember. But it meant we would be living at 11 Caldon Path, Oak Hill Park in Newton. And that was the beginning of the wonderful experience for us. You had to be a Newton veteran, and my husband had been all through Africa and Italy, and was the nicest of gentlemen.

Q: That's--

A: Other than that I have nothing else to report.

[Laughter]

Q: Well, what year was it that you moved to Oak Hill?

A: It must have been 1942, I think.

Q: Okay. And was it on the GI Bill, that he got the--

A: The--you had to be a Newton--you had to be a...veteran in order to be able--

Q: Yeah, to apply.

A: --and live in Newton. And then there was a map, and we pointed to I think 40, number 42, which meant that we would live at 11 Caldon Path, Oak Hill Park.

Q: Okay. Are you still at Oak Hill Park?

A: Not for a long time.

Q: Oh, Okay.

A: But it was--we had a wonderful experience. I may have been there for maybe 8 or 10 years, I can't remember, before we moved to the house I now live in--125 Plymouth Road, Newton Highlands.

Q: Oh, in Newton Highlands. So what was it like being one of the first people moving into Oak Hill?

A: It meant that we could be participants in a brand new group of people, all interested in the betterment--you had to be, as I say, my husband was a Newton resident. That was a requirement for that area. So we were lucky enough to be there and we just took a number and ended up at 11 Caldon Path. So we ended up--the good thing was that it was a mixed area. So it wasn't--as I said the requirement was to be a veteran--

Q: Right.

A: --but other than that, we had all ethnicities--

Q: Oh, that's nice.

A: --which was very good.

Q: Yes. And probably for that time more unusual. What was it like when you moved to Newton Highlands? Was it diverse and young people, or...?

A: Oh, that was just very nice. I've been in this house now for 50 years--

Q: Oh, wow.

A: --and as I'll tell you, the smile that I think--when I moved in, I would report that an older woman lives across the street, and an older woman lives next door. Now I'm that older woman. But I'm happy to be there.

Q: Yes.

A: Have nice young neighbors. And I'm very comfortable there.

Q: Right. What do you like about that neighborhood? About that section of Newton?

A: Yeah...I guess just that you could have your privacy, and yet there was a sense of community there. And they had occasionally a block party--not so much there as they had in Oak Hill Park,

but there were people--I mean, when you moved on, you automatically were in a different economic, so-to-speak, grouping.

Q: Right.

A: But the house I'm in, I've been in for 50 years.

Q: Wow.

A: And the amazing thing is, whoever would come and see me, if you look, the siding they put on the house was put there 80 years ago.

Q: Oh my!

A: It looks as though it was just installed.

Q: Really?

A: It is absolutely an amazing thing to see.

Q: It is.

A: So I'm inviting you, I'll be glad to give you coffee and my homemade Mundel bread.

Q: Oh, it sounds--

A: Anytime, just call in advance. I'm not a stay-at-home person, but I can stay at home.

Q: That's wonderful.

A: But anyway, that's the amazing thing about this house.

Q: Yes. And you love the neighborhood. Did you raise children in the house?

A: Of course. I had--at that time I had three children: my daughter, Carol, who now lives in Northhampton...What is she? 68 years old? Or 69.

Q: Would she mind your telling us?

A: What?

Q: Would she mind your telling us your age?

A: She's beautiful in all ways.

Q: I'm sure.

A: It's not an important issue to her.

Q: Like her mother.

A: Absolutely not an important issue.

Q: Right.

A: Unfortunately, I lost my son, Richard, a little over a year ago.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry.

A: And he was a very special young man, that impacted on a lot of people's lives during his lifetime. And then I have a younger daughter, who moved from New Jersey, is now setting up housekeeping in Dorchester with her family.

Q: Oh! Nice.

A: So I have my grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Q: That's wonderful. And what schools did they go to? Were you involved in the school that they went to?

A: Oh...growing up?

Q: Yes.

A: Oh, they went to Meadowbrook, Meadowbrook Junior High.

Q: Right.

A: That's where they went. And then my--both my older daughter went on to UMass Amherst, and Abby went to Framingham State. And my son went to the College of Business, and became very successful in the automobile industry.

Q: Right, right. And were you active in the school, or in any organizations, or...?

A: Oh, yes. Yeah. I did participate. I had always enjoyed being part of the activity that involved them. So...I just did it as a matter of fact, it wasn't anything that I thought, "Oh, some day they'll ask me, did I ever--"

Q: Oh no, no, of course!

A: So it was just something that was part of my involvement with my family.

Q: Right, right. Any other community things that you remember were important to you then and now?

A: Well, just as a young married, it was a special experience to live in Oak Hill Park, because the sense of community came as a fact that they all were veterans.

Q: Right.

A: And so then as a matter of fact, very important, my husband became a Boy Scout leader at that time.

Q: Wow!

A: So participated in making that area worthwhile for the young people.

Q: That's amazing. That's wonderful.

A: Everyone loved my husband, he was a very special gentleman. The word "gentle man," reflected my Burt.

Q: Yes, yes. Right, right. And any special events that you remember, either from there or Newton Highlands? Anything in being in Newton for that period?

A: Well, in Oak Hill Park, we used to have block parties, and things like that. But not so much in Newton Highlands. I think you transitioned from this group identification that we had in Oak Hill Park.

Q: Right.

A: And I would say we had more of a private kind of interaction with our neighbors.

Q: Right, right. So any special best memories of living in Newton? You were originally from Brookline, and then you became a Newtonite. What are some of the best memories of--in Newton, and you're still making them!

A: Well, I guess I think Newton has always offered many opportunities to enjoy different arts. And so, that I have participated, I certainly commend them for their Sunday program that they have at the Newton Library.

Q: Right.

A: So that I enjoy. And they have--I commend them for the Senior Center, which offers many different opportunities, as well as pretty things to pick up there every once in a while.

Q: [Laughter] They have things they sell. People come in and sell things.

A: And that, I have to admit, is one of my diseases. As she knows, I've got four things waiting for me to pick up now.

Q: Oh, wonderful! Alright.

A: Well I like art, but my kids are going to curse me. Because I don't need another thing in my house.

Q: Right.

A: But anyway.

Q: It's not a matter of need. You enjoy it.

A: That's right.

Q: What are some of the other activities at the Senior Center that you like and...?

A: Well, as I say, I like the concerts. There isn't actually--I haven't found my milieu there, as a matter of fact, because I like to play bridge. And they play bridge at nine o'clock in the morning.

Q: Oh, too early?

A: Well, it's not too early. It's not anything I have to get up--if there was a game at one o'clock, I would play. My husband was a bridge player, so I would like it, but it's not anything. So I do go to the...I'm trying to think...stupid...

Q: Other activities that you--

A: By the hospital there, I go to play bridge there. On a Wednesday.

Q: Not near Newton--

A: Oh, at the Temple Reyim.

Q: Oh, okay. Near Newton-Wellesley.

A: Yeah.

Q: Not too far. Oh so Temple Reyim.

A: On Wednesday they have a program.

Q: That's nice. Are you a member there, are you active in--

A: If I'm lucky I find a partner and we play bridge. And I put up my 11 dollars, that includes lunch.

Q: Nice!

A: And it's a very nice--it's a very organized kind of program there.

Q: Okay. So you do get to play once a week usually?

A: I usually find a partner.

Q: That's wonderful.

A: So that's the power of positive thinking.

Q: Yes.

A: And that's what's gonna be on my tombstone.

Q: Well, that's wonderful!

A: Be positive.

Q: We like that.

A: So that...that you know all about me now.

Q: Well, I don't know about that, but we're learning!

A: But my philosophy.

Q: It's a wonderful philosophy. That's why you have interests in so many things.

A: Yeah. Well, they are--I like going to the museum, and trips to--I take -- try and take advantage of the various things that are offered.

Q: That's wonderful.

A: And I don't feel constrained or restrained because of my age. I'm able to pick up and go.

Q: Great. That's wonderful. And you should continue for many, many years. What's been the biggest change you've noticed in Newton? You've been here a long time, at least 50 years or more, what are some of the changes you've seen? I'm sure your neighborhood and--

A: The obvious: that they've been building these McMansions.

Q: Yes.

A: I mean, that is part of the thing. And I'm not sure--well, I guess the Newton Tab keeps you pretty aware of what's going on in this city.

Q: Right.

A: But I mean, you have to read it. You don't--if you didn't read the Tab, you might not know what was being offered.

Q: Right. Right. In terms of your neighborhood and your neighbors, have you noticed changes in kinds of people that have moved in, the mix of people?

A: Well, as I say--as they say, there's the older woman lives across the street. And the old lady lives next door. But because of the age difference there, I observe that the younger people, they're not so young, because they have their grown up children. But they are professional people. So they're up and out of the house early on all the days. That's what I would observe, that the people that are in their fifties and sixties go to work and have their profession, so they're out of the house.

Q: And was that different when you were raising your children?

A: Oh sure. In Oak Hill Park it was more at home, and a more community kind of thing.

Q: Right.

A: This isn't that sense of community.

Q: Right.

A: That's--although, they do try in my neighborhood to have a neighborhood party or a barbecue.

Q: Right.

A: But I've gone, but I see the people there, of course they're all much younger, so I make my appearance and have my hot dog and move right along.

Q: I'm sure they'd love your Mandel bread, though.

A: I'm sorry. I'll remember to make it. That's alright. You didn't volunteer, I'm volunteering.

Q: And were more women staying at home when you raised your children at that time? You said now more are professionals. You noticed they're out of the house. Was it different when you first moved in?

A: Actually, raising my family, I was a traveling sales lady even when I had my--I had some of my children, because we were in a home craft industry--

Q: Oh!

A: --that we developed, which was very interesting.

Q: Oh. What kind of--

A: That started with my mother. Home industry, if you're not familiar with those times, was that we had--this was interesting as a young married. We had offices in the arcade at Coolidge Corner. And what we did is manufactured jewel cases and padded hangers. And the home industry was that we advertised for people that knew how to sew, and they came and we would give them the material, and they would make the items. And even though I didn't sew, we had jewel cases that had a piping around it, and if that piping wasn't perfect, they heard from me. So--and I was a traveling sales lady back in my day.

Q: So you kept up with the business even when you were in Newton?

A: Yeah. So then when I moved to Newton--I'm trying to think--well it existed for a time there. But not so much. Not so much. I was busy raising a family.

Q: Of course. Of course. And who were the people that came to sew for you?

A: Oh. That was a fascinating thing. We'd just advertise in the paper for people that liked to sew. And as I say, it was interesting. We were in the arcade building, and we had people that came to sew, to make these jewel cases that had a piping around them. And if the piping cording wasn't right, I didn't know how to sew, but I knew that it had to be perfect.

Q: Right. Were they immigrants mostly, or...?

A: But nice people.

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: They enjoyed--it was a home industry.

Q: Right.

A: That's what it was.

Q: Right.

A: But it was successful.

Q: That's good.

A: I'll give you one other smile, because when I was travelling and I was in Chicago, I went over--I think I could go across to Niagara Falls.

Q: Oh.

A: And I went across the--and I'm gonna tell you a secret--they're still looking for me. I snuck in two pair of argyle socks for my husband.

[Laughter]

Q: That's funny.

A: Anyway.

Q: That's great.

A: I was a good traveling sales lady.

Q: Yes! No, it sounds like it. How did your family get--come to Brookline? Were they born there, or...?

A: My folks--my mother lived in Worcester, and my father lived in Lynn. And my father was in the candy business. Oh, do you want to know that? The place in Allston--I'm trying to think where --Gold Brand Confectionery company.

Q: Oh!

A: Used to be my--

Q: Your father.

A: --my father's business.

Q: That's amazing.

A: I'm trying to think the--I think it's called the Everett Street.

Q: Yes.

A: In Allston.

Q: Oh, really?

A: Do you know that?

Q: Vaguely, yeah. That's amazing.

A: Well, there's still that building.

Q: That's great!

A: Exists. I forget what it is now, but that building exists where we had our business.

Q: Okay. So they were born in the United States? Your parents?

A: Dad--yeah. Yeah. My mother grew up in Worcester.

Q: That's great.

A: First family of Worcester. They were a well-known family.

Q: Yeah. That's wonderful. That's terrific. So what are some of the things that you enjoyed doing, at that time, fun in Newton? What were some of the activities that you remember doing

with your family, your husband, yourself? Did they go ice skating on Bullough's pond? Did they go ice skating?

A: Maybe Burt did, I wasn't much of a--I wasn't much of a skater. But my daughters were more participatory. Richard was more into--not sports, he was always interested in business and that kind of thing.

Q: But what did you like doing at that time?

A: What--when--as a young married?

Q: Yes. Or even later, what were some of the--

A: The same things I enjoy now.

Q: Right.

A: I enjoy--well as I say, a young married I was a traveling saleslady--

Q: Yes, yes.

A: --which was interesting. Gave you an opportunity to meet different people and be successful. As I say, when I went over--I told you the story--when I went into Niagara, Ontario, I snuck in two pair of argyle socks for my husband. But a life I enjoyed--I enjoyed the community, I

participated in my temple that I belonged. I went through Sunday school at Temple Israel in Boston.

Q: Really? That's great.

A: I was confirmed. And then my children went to Temple Israel. So we have a long association there.

Q: Yes. Did things change there? At Temple Israel? Did you notice changes? How many people belonged then and what did you notice over time?

A: No, there--Oh, I'm trying to think whether my family--but they all went through Sunday school there, so that was their activity, and I still--I think they are trying to develop that. I don't think they--I don't know whether they have quite as large an enrollment--

Q: Right. Right. As they did.

A: --today, as they did when my family grew up there.

Q: Right.

A: But it offered opportunities, and that's--

Q: It's great. It's still a very active community there, Temple Israel.

A: Oh, definitely.

Q: Yeah. A lot of young people now.

A: But young people and they try to draw them--draw them in by having various programs there.

Q: Yeah. That's wonderful. That's great.

A: So that is my story, and I'm--as you can tell, I'm endlessly interested and inquisitive, so I go and do.

Q: It's wonderful.

A: I'm not a stay-at-home person.

Q: No. No. It's wonderful. It's wonderful.

A: Yeah, no, I'm lucky. I'm lucky.

Q: You look wonderful.

A: I'm glad because then I--you can take advantages of all the things that are around--at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Q: So you have a group who goes? You go with a group there?

A: Sometimes, but I don't--I'm not dependent on--

Q: You go when you want to go.

A: If there's a program or they are going on a tour or something, I'll sign up for that, but--I just now see there's a program there that I tore out that I saw when my daughter comes in. We'll do that. I enjoy going to symphony. That's my Friday afternoon activity.

Q: Terrific. Yeah, they have a great program then.

A: Yeah, they do. You can buy a rush seat, too.

Q: Okay, good to know.

A: So, no secrets in this room.

Q: No, that's wonderful. Really, it's great.

A: Well, if you've got an inquisitive mind and want to go and do, it's available for all of us.

Q: Right. Right.

A: Some take advantage, some don't.

Q: Right. Well it's nice to see that you do. And is there anything else about Newton, about your neighborhood, about being here so long that you'd like to share?

A: Well, I'm glad I'm still in my house.

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: And it's--well, but the only observation I make is that all the neighbors are young, even though they have grown children. The neighbors that are maybe in their 50's and 60's go off to work every day--

Q: Yeah. Sure. Sure.

A: --which, once upon a time wouldn't be--I was lucky enough to be able to go to museums or do that kind of thing.

Q: Right. Right.

A: But I'd say the--I see they're still involved in their profession, and the houses--the neighborhood is probably quiet from nine o'clock on.

Q: Right. Right.

A: So that's fine, but then I'm not at home watching, looking out the window weirdly.

Q: Right. Right. Which is also nice. It's great that you're still in your home.

A: Yeah. I enjoy it.

Q: And you're able to maintain it and feel--

A: Yeah. My sickness is I'm still acquiring. My kids are gonna kill me. My kids--there are four things waiting for me.

Q: Oh!

A: But that's my disease.

Q: But that's great--you enjoy it, it's not a disease. It's wonderful that you have those interests and those activities. Alright, well thank you so much for doing this today.

A: Oh I thank you for being interested.

Q: Really, thank you for sharing that, Shirlee. A pleasure meeting you.

A: Oh thank--it was a pleasure for me to meet you. And thank you for wanting to add me to the Newton Historic Society.

Q: No it's wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. Really. Thanks for coming.

A: Well, listen, we'll have to make a date, or I'll have to remember to bring--make a fresh batch of Mundel bread.

Q: Okay. Okay. I'll take you up on that.

A: Yeah. I'll do it. I'm ready to make it. It's the one recipe I--it's the only recipe I make. It was my father's sister....recipe, Aunt Anne's recipe. And so that's my claim to fame, if there's anything.

Q: I hope your children have the recipe.

A: But it's got good ingredients.

Q: It sounds wonderful. I hope your kids have the recipe, too.

A: Pleasure meeting you.

Q: Yeah, thank you so much.

A: Well I thank you for being interested.

Q: Can we take a picture?

END OF INTERVIEW

